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FASHION

# Diplomatic approach to social enterprise

British-run initiative provides valuable skills, mentoring and advice to ethnic Miao people

By CHINA DAILY

Danzhai and Leishan, two State-supported but poor counties in Guizhou province in Southwest China, are peppered with many rural settlements of Miao, Dong and other ethnic groups, many of whom have had to live on meager incomes from farming.

The hard living has forced many over the years to migrate to the more prosperous eastern cities of the country.

However, those willing to choose a different career path in recent years have been enjoying much better fortunes, courtesy of a social initiative run by the British Embassy in Beijing which is focused on the commercialization of traditional handicrafts in the region.

Launched in 2009, the Social Enterprise Program, created and run by the embassy's culture and education section, has provided entrepreneurial skills training, mentoring and access to UK business knowledge.

By the end of last year, it had trained around 1,800 individuals and distributed 29 million yuan (\$4.73 million) in funding from numerous partners into 91 social enterprises.

Gen-silk Co Ltd, which sells traditional embroideries and batik, is one of a number of social enterprises in the area to have been helped by the British initiative.

The company has set up three cultural development centers in Danzhai and Leishan counties and in the city of Kaili, which have already trained more than 4,000 ethnic Miao women.

Craftswomen who have enrolled at the Gen-silk handicraft centers can earn a monthly income of 800 to 1500 yuan producing various items such as handbags and scarves, while senior crafts-women can earn upward of 2,500 yuan.

Jack Yu, director and first secretary at the British Embassy, said that combining

traditional Miao handicraft traditions with modern designs, and using an e-commerce-based business model, the company has become a profitable social enterprise which is also dedicated to tackling social problems.

"The program not only increases the income of crafts-women, but also improves their social status and helps boost the local economy," said Yu.

China has witnessed a huge expansion of social enterprise organizations in recent years, created to deal with such issues like poverty, healthcare, left-behind children, and environmental pollution.

Most are supported by governments or voluntary donations, but there is still a strong determination to make a profit in their own right, said Yu.

The British Embassy has just announced its latest initiative under the program, cooperating with the China Philanthropy Research Institute at Beijing Normal University.

It has set up the China-UK Social Enterprise and Investment Research Center, which will use British experience of social enterprise development to help improve the commercialization of China's existing organizations.

The social affairs sector has a long history in the United Kingdom.

Data from Social Enterprise UK, its representative body, show there were more than 70,000 organizations registered to carry out such work in the country in 2013, employing around one million staff, which contributed some 24 billion pounds (\$36.8 billion) to good causes.

Wang Zhenyao, dean of the China Philanthropy Research Institute at Beijing Normal University, says China's social enterprise community certainly lacks nothing in terms of generosity or ambition to do good, but its transparency and operational efficiency must be improved.



Craftswomen from the ethnic Miao community work on traditional handicraft. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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Jack Yu, director and first secretary at the British Embassy

4,000

number of ethnic Miao women trained by Gen-silk Co Ltd

The UK's social enterprise system is admired around the world, said Wang, who thinks China can use some of that expertise, with the help of the new research center.



Miao craftswomen learn to make traditional batik craft and products at a cultural center in Danzhai county, Guizhou province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

SERVICES

## Bakery rising to the challenge

By CHINA DAILY

Wang Siming is a 25-year-old baker's apprentice who suffers from learning disabilities.

He wakes early every day to take a bus to work. He meets his co-workers at around 8:30 am to start preparing ingredients for the day ahead.

The Maizi Bakery — the word Maizi means "wheat" in Chinese — where he works was created by Guangzhou Huiling Community Service for People with Intellectual Disability, in Guangdong province, as a social enterprise which aims to provide career opportunities to people with disabilities similar to Wang's.

We certainly don't want anyone to give up."

Zhang Yan, full-time social worker

Working at Maizi, he says, is the first step in achieving his dream of becoming a full-time baker, but also in becoming independent and self-sufficient.

The bakery has seven apprentices and employs two full-time social workers as teachers, one of whom is Zhang Yan, who also manages work schedules.

Zhang says the baking duties, including preparing ingredients, mixing and packaging, are allocated according to the apprentices' interests.

"If they are allocated work they are not interested in, they can become negative, like anyone in any job," said Zhang. "We certainly don't want anyone to give up."

"My job is to bake sweet bread with red beans," said Wang excitedly, explaining it has become his specialty. "I need to knead the dough really hard."

Zhang's full-time colleague is social worker Li Zhuang, who is satisfied with the progress the apprentices have made over the past six months.

Li said the biggest problem to start with was the apprentices used to forget (maybe conveniently) to clean the equipment and baking tins — but now every step in the process has become routine for them, and they are all doing well.

Maizi is the third such bakery set up to help people with learning disabilities. There are also the Aide Bakery in Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu province, and the Boske Bakery in Taiwan, both of which are also run as social welfare companies.

Maizi was set up using many of the same systems and procedures used in the Boske. The endowment which has financially supported it is only guaranteed for a year, so Zhang says he is working flat out to hit the 800 loaves of bread it needs to sell daily, just to break even.

So far production has reached 100, and so the plan now is to take on more staff.

Briefly

### 5m yuan raised for orphans

China's largest search engine Baidu Inc, Shanghai-based investment company Shimao Group and the Shanghai Charity Foundation jointly held the latest "One-Hour Public Service" in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, to help raise funds for orphans suffering from serious diseases. Baidu Chairman Robin Li and Shimao Chairman Xu Rongmao launched this year's initiative, which sees one yuan donated to a children's care center every time an Internet user makes a donation. Five million yuan (\$815,000) was raised in total.

### Chinese lessons for Benin children

The Confucius Institute in the west African republic of Benin is to work with children in the country's Abomey Calavi SOS Children's Village. Julien Segbo, director of the institute, said Chinese language teaching will become part of the school's curriculum from next year. "Providing Chinese language skills to the children will offer them more opportunities in future."

CHINA DAILY

MEDIA

# Voices turned into hope for visually impaired

By CHINA DAILY

One of China's most successful new companies has been spearheading an initiative aimed at helping the lives of the country's 12.63 million blind and visually impaired citizens.

WeChat, the social-networking platform owned by e-commerce giant Tencent Holdings Ltd, launched the Voice Donor project last month, encouraging users to donate their time, and their voices, to doing voiceovers for reading books to be offered to those in need.

Cui Huiping, director of the Information Center of the China Disabled Persons' Federation, which is involved in the initiative, said: "Braille books are difficult to learn from, and still too expensive for many people."

The technology being used to create the new reading books, she said, can provide a huge help to people, through the creation of a larger national audio reading and voice library.

The project began collecting voices at the start of May and had gathered 3 million different voice donations by the middle of the month, which were then collated into some 100 audio books.

May 17 was the 25th National Day for Helping People with

Braille books are difficult to learn from, and still too expensive for many people."

Cui Huiping, director of the Information Center of the China Disabled Persons' Federation

Disabilities, and to mark the occasion, organizers offered those new books to 100 different special blind schools across the country, which can help around 10,000 visually impaired children and 2 million people in total.

This new library of sound was created by the WeChat Voice Donor group, which created its own artificial intelligence-based voice recognition model to complete the task.

It selected the best reading voices by comparing them with accepted industry standards, explained Professor Yang Qiang of the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, who acted as technical



Representatives of Tencent Holdings Ltd, Nanfang Media Group, CITIC Press Group, PhoenixTV and Vanke Group at the launching of the WeChat Voice Donor program on May 17, the 25th National Day for Helping Persons with Disabilities, which collects voices for reading books for visually impaired children. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

adviser to the project.

Cui said that despite the technological progress enjoyed by many in China, not enough modern communication devices are being used by the disabled community.

She said smartphones, for instance, with full-screen touch technology are a great challenge for many disabled, especially people with visual impairments. Many of them are still largely dependent on Braille for study or work.

Patrick Haverman, deputy country director of the United Nations Development Program in China, said the current living and working conditions of many disabled Chinese people could be improved, and that the country still has a huge gap to bridge in promoting the rights and entitlements of people with disabilities.

He said there are more than 85 million people in China with disabilities of some kind,

but just 21 million of them are employed, and 28 percent of disabled school-aged children are not participating in full-time education.

Picking up on Cui's point about modern technology, Haverman said that the Voice Donor project, however, is a great example of how high-tech systems can be used to massive effect for social innovation, calling it a modern symbol of how people with disabilities can be helped.